

Submitted by Vermont State Representative Linda Waite-Simpson, 3/17/14

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on a patient's right to compassionate aid in dying. My name is Linda Waite-Simpson and I am a member of the Vermont House of Representatives. As you may know, Vermont passed our version of this bill last May. Our statute is unique in that we use the Oregon model for the first 2 ½ years and then we allow best medical practices to guide physicians in aid in dying. It was important for many Vermont legislators to keep government out of the dying process as much as possible while still providing protections for patients and physicians.

You may hear opposition to taking action on this bill. This legislation is first and foremost about protecting patients – from coercion by family members, from fear of dying alone and in pain and from losing control. 15 years ago, my husband and I purchased our home from a woman who had been away visiting her sick father in Montreal. She returned to Vermont to find her husband, who had lung cancer, in the basement with a gunshot wound to his head. It was such a tragic thing to experience and so disturbing to find him like that – the trauma and violence is bad enough and not being able to say 'goodbye' was incredibly painful for her. We need to give people a full range of choices and this is one of many along the spectrum of 'end of life' care.

After holding a public forum in my district in November of 2012, I walked away knowing that even if my constituents did not want this option themselves, they certainly did not want to take this choice away from others. My district is a swing district – we have sent members of both parties to the House and Senate and frankly, this is not a party issue. I have constituents who don't always agree with my choices but they do appreciate my deliberation on tough issues and my ability to explain why I made certain choices.

Like the debate on abortion, Compassionate Aid in Dying is controversial but I would ask you to look closely at the choices people in your district are making today. If you have time to watch a Frontline episode entitled "The Suicide Plan", I would highly encourage it. For me, it was so evident that there were groups in Vermont helping people to die, sometimes in very gruesome ways. In your communities, do you see evidence of helium asphyxiation? Suicide by firearm – especially by residents who are older than 60? Is this how we envision end of life for our loved ones? And is there a more compassionate alternative where loved ones can be present without fear of legal reprisal? Only you can answer these questions. I would encourage you to be courageous in your deliberations and to put protections in place for patients, for health care workers and for family and friends of the terminally ill who simply want the option of choosing the time and place of their death.

Again, thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.